

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

ELAINE LINDSAY AND MICHAEL GRIFFITH

Australian Catholic University

To each his life's work, breeding
a rose or milk-feeding
an ulcer with shares floated
each year on the Exchange ...

I'll settle for less: such bread
-and-butter fare as living,
mens sana, sound of limb,
till eighty—a tightrope walker

and still a practitioner
of the delicate sidestep, keeping
my nerve and a grip on syntax
as I venture on thin air.

David Malouf, from 'five odes of Horace', I, xxi

Horace prayed to Apollo that he might live into old age lacking neither honour nor the art of the lyre. David Malouf nominated eighty years; for someone in their mid-thirties that might have seemed old age. The gods have been generous and Malouf's eightieth birthday has been marked not only by seminars, tributes, media interviews and reading tours, but also by two new books, *Earth Hour* (with further translations from the odes of Horace) and a collection of essays, *A First Place*.

This issue of *JASAL* had its genesis in The David Malouf Symposium held at Australian Catholic University (North Sydney) on 31 May 2013 to honour the author and his work. Several Symposium speakers have contributed to this volume which, with its mix of tributes and essays, maintains the celebratory tone. Malouf was present throughout the day, engaging with the paper-givers and joining Ivor Indyk in the closing conversation, reproduced here.

Australian Catholic University has enjoyed a special relationship with David Malouf over the last decade: not only does he meet with each year's Australian Literature class on the Strathfield campus, but he also makes occasional visits to literature classes run for disadvantaged and homeless students through the University and Mission Australia's Clemente Program. Characters such as Gemmy Fairley (*Remembering Babylon*), Jim Saddler (*Fly Away Peter*), Daniel Carney (*The Conversations at Curlow Creek*) and Somax (*Ransom*), all of whom find beauty in the most difficult of circumstances, speak directly to those who similarly live at the margins of middle-class society.

The circumstances of Malouf's life are touched on by Yvonne Smith in her exhumation of his first writings and by James Tulip in his reminiscences of Malouf's early Sydney years. Born in Brisbane on 20 March 1934, Malouf was raised in the house that he later immortalised in the memoir *12 Edmondstone Street* and was educated at Brisbane Grammar School and the

University of Queensland, graduating with a BA (Hons) in English in 1954. He lectured at the University of Queensland from 1955–57 before travelling to England in 1959. There, he worked as a teacher and was, from 1962 to 1968, English Master at St Anselm's College, Birkenhead. On returning to Australia, he took up an appointment as senior tutor/lecturer with the English Department at the University of Sydney until he retired in 1977, already a prize-winning poet and fiction writer. He served as a member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council (1973–75) and in 1978 the Board awarded him a three-year Writer's Fellowship, enabling him to devote himself to writing full-time. For many years he divided his time between Compagnatico (Italy) and Sydney and is now domiciled in an inner Sydney suburb where, in the words of Don Randall, he continues to 'envision Australia,' 'in ways that make it habitable, a place of meaningful, self-sustaining community' (Randall 11). He was made an Officer in the Order of Australia (AO) in 1987 for service to literature.

As Nicholas Jose observes in his scoping essay, Malouf's output has been both prodigious and varied: poetry, short fiction, novels, memoirs, essays, libretti, music theatre and a play. The industry that his work generates is similarly substantial, with 1,383 works on or about Malouf listed in the AustLit database on 8 July 2014. This volume cannot hope to be inclusive but it does indicate, as in Ihab Hassan's fond tribute, the qualities of the man and the attraction his works exert on writers, readers and critics internationally and domestically.

What is most noticeable, as one reads the Malouf opus, is his consistency of voice and subject matter. One recalls, as does Jose, Malouf's 1996 interview with Helen Daniel following the publication of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. 'If you think of your work as being like a house,' he said, 'each new work is going into a different room of that house, which will offer a different aspect, maybe of the same landscape, or of a landscape that is somewhere surrounding, and will be both different and familiar' (Daniel 11).

The foundations of that house might well be Malouf's concern with the sacred: as he insisted towards the close of the Symposium, 'I think that this world is the only world and it is utterly sacred. . . . [T]he sacred, whatever that is, is *absolutely* in it.' This preoccupation is touched upon by most of the contributors to this volume, whether they are addressing Malouf's treatment of history, his representations of nature, his awareness of the religious in creaturely things, his commitment to both the inward way of silence and to public conversation, and, above all, his luminous vision of the country's 'other life,' most cogently expressed in *Remembering Babylon*. Malouf's books—poetry included—are part of a continuing conversation that he has been having with 'a whole set of annunciating angels, waiting to tell us whatever it is.'¹ They invite us to experience the mystery of life through the medium of other people's lives.

The impression that Malouf's books share an emotional and philosophical landscape, regardless of their geographical and historical settings, is reinforced in this collection. It is to be expected that Clare Rhoden, for example, would turn to *Ransom*, *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World* when tracing Malouf's exploration of the place of war in national history and personal story—but then *Ransom* reappears in Kay Ferres' discussion of voice and rhetoric, *Fly Away Peter* in Damien Barlow's examination (utilising a queer theoretical framework) of Malouf's use of epiphanies, and both *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World* in Bill Ashcroft's description of that 'other world' that lies just out of reach, but to which poetry aspires. Similarly, novels such as *Remembering Babylon*, *Harland's Half Acre* and *An Imaginary Life* support diverse readings and also find themselves in conversation with Malouf's poetry and

essays—a demonstration, if any were needed, of the critical riches to be gained by reading across Malouf's oeuvre.

While Malouf's preoccupations seem constant, it is interesting to see if and how critical perceptions have changed over the years. Clare Archer-Lean references the works of previous critics in her reading of *Remembering Babylon* as 'a reconsideration of pastoral idealism,' while Barlow builds on the work of Stephen Kirby, Stephen Abblitt and others in his study of homoerotic desire. Nicholas Birns takes issue with constructions of Malouf as the author of historical novels, arguing instead that books like *Harland's Half-Acre* and *The Great World* suggest that efforts to find wisdom and insight in the past are as fruitless as placing hope in progress. Birns would be sympathetic to Andrew Taylor's observation, some twenty years earlier, that a 'picture of Malouf as a novelist of history is hard to sustain, despite the clarity with which his characters act out their roles within a context of sharply observed period detail.'²

For the most part, however, the contributors here are content to engage directly with Malouf's writing, to see how he achieves his effects, rather than attempt to measure him against a range of theoretical positions. Certainly there is reference to post-colonialism and queer theory, but there seems little interest in positioning Malouf as a Romantic (or late-arriving Romantic or post-Romantic) writer, as a contributor to migrant literature, or as an anti-imperialist. For, it has to be said, there is something enticing about Malouf's writing that encourages readers to immerse, if not lose, themselves in the beauty and rhythms of his language. Here, Carolyn Masel celebrates Malouf's ability to trigger memories within his readers, particularly in *Harland's Half Acre*, through the repetition of images and symbols, and Dennis Haskell relishes his use of silence in poetry and fiction, noting 'this stillness and inward orientation are always what drive his writing forward. . . . His novels do contain narratives but they are not driven by narrative.' Colm Tóibín, in a Skype interview broadcast at the Malouf Symposium, also touched on the role of silence in *Remembering Babylon* and *Ransom*, where

. . . it looks as though each character is offered an autonomy to behave as they do rather than the author wanting them to do so. It is very convincing. It is serious. And therefore it has all the more power in actually offering a set of gestures, as almost ideal ones or ones which are suffused with something more than themselves which I think could matter to the reader and indeed matter to the world, and create for the novel a sort of power, written in silence, read in silence, an imagined universe. And yet, by imagining others, and by imagining others in all their humanity, we are actually participating in something pure and strange and mysterious but also direct and powerful ourselves as readers.

Over the years, David Malouf has achieved increasing prominence as a public intellectual, primarily through his collections of essays. From their respective hemispheres, Kay Ferres and John Scheckter address this aspect of his writing, and again the landscape is familiar. Ferres, like Masel, identifies how Malouf contrives to engage his readers and listeners, drawing them into a world of feeling. By causing them to recognise it as their own world, he reinscribes the 'public realm as a world of feeling as well as of reason'; in this he reinforces the value of arts and culture in any engagement with 'the big questions of contemporary life.' Scheckter, in *The Happy Life*, picks up on Malouf's respect for solitude as a place where we may confront and respond to our limitations and from thence move back into the world 'with better selves to offer.' Although Malouf may opine that imaginative works 'have nothing to do with the world of opinion' (as quoted by Ferres), both Scheckter and Ferres clearly

demonstrate how Malouf's abilities as a writer and his international literary reputation assure his cultural authority.

As one reads through assessments of Malouf's work over the decades, one cannot help but notice the presence of an ongoing core of critics and, amongst them, a certain homogeneity of preoccupation and tone. The fact that they are traversing the same, albeit expanding, body of work is obviously a factor, as is Malouf's ability to lure his readers into his way of thinking, both through the seductiveness of his writing and the clarity of his own commentary upon the writing. Leigh Dale and Helen Gilbert have noted that Malouf 'is perhaps one of the most astute critics and commentators on his own work,'³ and indeed it is difficult to write about the work without engaging with the author's insightful reflections, which appear in essays, speeches and interviews. This can have both positive and negative effects: readings can be enriched by access to the source, but it may become difficult to test contrary critical perspectives or find new themes to explore. In this context, international commentators who approach Malouf's work with a different set of cultural references, reading him in the light of, say, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, Norman Rockwell, Alice Munro—or, indeed, in the light of international interpretations of Patrick White, Randolph Stow, Shirley Hazzard, Tom Keneally, Peter Carey, and Les Murray—have something special to offer. Unconstrained by the domestic critical apparatus that sustains Australian literary studies they are free to reveal unexpected aspects of their subject. In so doing, they may also find a new way of viewing their own cultural milieu, as Tóibín observed at the 2013 Symposium, when speaking of Malouf's love of the idea of redemption, as exemplified in the role of the Irish in Australian history: 'I think that, viewed from Ireland, he has really changed our view of Australian history and therefore of course, of Irish history.'

David Malouf is one of the most amiable and highly respected of writers, as might be gathered from Ihab Hassan's birthday tribute and Colm Tóibín's appreciation of the 'richness, ambiguity and . . . openness' of his work, which reassures us that 'it is still open to us to find new ways to live, or new ways to feel, or new ways to love, or new ways to be with each other.' His Australian friends Nicholas Jose, James Tulip and Mandy Martin are to be thanked for generously permitting publication of their tributes to David, as is Juno Gemes, whose striking photographic portraits of David reveal the 'practitioner / of the delicate sidestep,' assured as ever, sound of limb and syntax. Thanks of course to the Symposium paper-givers and the contributors to this volume, all of whom wished to celebrate David and his legacy—and enduring thanks to David, whose work speaks to, and for, so many.

NOTES

¹ 'There are lots of figures and subjects and pictures and sounds that keep recurring. They're there very frequently when you begin a poem, and they may be relevant to this occasion or not, in which case you put them away for next time. I really do think of them as rather like a whole set of announcing angels, waiting to tell us whatever it is. . . . Certainly more and more what I try to do in writing, and also in moving towards what I think of as the occasion of a poem, is to put myself in contact with these obsessive figures—or whatever they are.' David Malouf in conversation with Jim Davidson, 'Interview: David Malouf', *Meanjin* 39.3 (1980), 332.

² Andrew Taylor, 'The Great World, History, and Two or One Other Things', in *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf*, ed. Amanda Nettelbeck, Nedlands: The Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, 1994, 35.

³ Leigh Dale and Helen Gilbert, 'Edges of the Self: Topographies of the Body in the Writing of David Malouf', in *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf*, ed. Amanda Nettelbeck, Nedlands: The Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, 1994, 85.

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